

## James 4:1-3

### I. Your selfish desires are the cause of your relational problems (1)

#### A. Q: What is the source of your strife? (1a-b)

James is inquiring the reason for their worldly attitude and actions, in order to address, not just the symptoms, but the underlying causes, and then to offer solutions in the following passage

1. What is the source of your conflict? (1a)
2. And what is the source of the quarrels among you? (1b)

These two propositions are fairly synonymous, reflecting Hebrew parallelism

The additional information in the second proposition is to emphasize that the fighting is “in you”

This could mean “within you” i.e. an interior struggle within each person. This fits with the idea of “desires” and “not getting what you want” in the following propositions

Or it could mean “among you” i.e. between different people. This fits with the idea of “envy” and “murder” in later propositions as well as the general idea of the previous contexts

#### B. A: Is it not from this – from your desires that struggle in your members? (1c)

Technically, this is in the form of a question, but it is a rhetorical question. It’s meaning is to rhetorically state where their conflicts come from, thus answering the previous question.

This proposition has the same ambiguity as the previous two – Is it referring to the struggle within an individual, or between different people

In the first case “members” is the members of a body, similar to the way Paul uses the term.

In the second case, “members” is the members of the congregation.

“desires” refers to the experience of pleasure, usually referring to illicit, sinful desires for illegitimate pleasure gained by sinful means. Our sinful passions are the root of the problems and enmity

### II. You are unsatisfied because you are selfish (2-3)

This is a series of four similar ideas, consisting first of a statement of what his readers do, and then how the result is against their hopes and expectations. The point is that their actions do not give the desired results, because they cannot, because they are the wrong actions. They are unwise actions, that are worldly. They are evidence that his readers still need the wisdom that comes from God, and they should submit to His ways and wisdom and righteousness. Sinful passions cause problems, and never satisfy.

This passage ends in an unresolved failure caused by sinful passions. Only in the next passage is the solution given, which can bring one out of this dead end

#### A. You desire but don’t get what you want (2a-b)

Everyone knows the frustration of not getting what they want. This typically brings out a selfish attitude of resentment and self-pity. Often this attitude develops into actions of vengeance toward whatever frustrated the desire.

1. Even though you desire (2a)

The object of the desire is not stated, and so is open-ended. It could be a desire for things or experiences, or status, etc.

2. Yet you do not have (2b)

This also is non-specific. It could refer to ownership, possession, control, etc.

**B. You murder and envy but cannot get what you want (2c-e)**

**1. Even though you murder and envy (2c-d)**

It is possible that these two terms are not separate ideas, but are one idea from the combination of the two, such as “you murder with envy” or “you have murderous envy”

This would be an expression of the temptation to vengeance when a desire is frustrated – to be jealous of those who realize the desire and wanting them out of the way, so that you may take it, or possibly even wanting violence toward them purely out of spite, stemming from this envy

**a You murder (2c)**

**b And you envy (2d)**

This word has a range of meaning that includes strong desire for something, zeal, and envy against someone else because of a strong desire for what they have

**2. Yet you are not able to attain (2e)**

No matter the extremes gone to, the desire is beyond your ability to attain for yourself. We are neither sovereign nor omnipotent. Therefore, we are unable to get what we want, no matter how hard we try.

**C. You quarrel and fight but don't get what you want (2f-i)**

**1. Even though you quarrel and fight (2f-g)**

The desires spoken of in 1c were the cause of the actions spoken of in 1a and 1b, yet these actions failed because their foundations and powers were not from God's wisdom.

**a You dispute (2f)**

This is the verb form of the noun in 1b

**b And you fight (2g)**

This is the verb form of the noun in 1a

**2. But you don't get because you didn't ask (2h-i)**

The ultimate cause of the failure is now stated – they did not follow the advice James gave in 1:5-6 to ask God for any wisdom that is lacking

And they did not even ask God for the thing desired – they failed to see God as the ultimate source of every good and perfect gift (cf. 1:17)

Rather they saw themselves as self-sufficient to gain their desires, but their desires gave birth to sin, and bore fruit in death (cf. 1:14-15)

**a And yet you do not have (2h)**

**b Reason: Because you do not ask (2i)**

D. You ask with selfish motives and don't get what you want (3)

1. Even though you ask (3a)

In the previous proposition, the reason was that they did not ask, and this proposition moves the argument forward one step. Even when they do ask, they don't receive, because they do not ask rightly.

This might seem like God is being picky and withholding good gifts until we get the right password for His gifts, but the reality is much different. It is because God is good and holy and will not be mocked.

Just like a good parent who won't give their child something that will hurt the child, God refuses to give us what will feed our selfish pleasures, which will in turn feed our sin and strife

2. Yet you do not receive because you ask selfishly (3b-d)

a Yet you do not receive (3b)

b Reason: you ask selfishly just to feed your pleasures (3c-d)

1) Because you ask wickedly (3c)

"wickedly" is a generic term for doing something in a morally bad or evil way, and usually with harmful results

From the context, this is usually translated as "with bad motives"

2) Purpose: so that you may waste it on your desires (3d)

"desires" is the same word as in 1c

"waste" comes from the word for spend, but often with the connotation of lavishly, and in this context, it is spent on something that is harmful, and therefore, wasted

-cf. the prodigal son, who spent his father's money lavishly on selfish pleasures

God will not give good gifts for them just to be wasted on sinful pleasures that draw His people away from Him.

Therefore, his holding back these things is actually an act of grace, rather than an act of stinginess